



SHADES OF GREEN: PERSPECTIVES ON NATURE IN

NANCY LORD'S *GREEN ALASKA*

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A

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty

of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Fairbanks, Alaska

May 2005

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a work of literary criticism, specifically eco-criticism, of the non-fiction book *Green Alaska: Dreams from the Far Coast* by Alaskan writer Nancy Lord. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the literary techniques employed by Lord in her representation of nature in this book. Furthermore, the purpose of this thesis is to present Lord's book to the critical field in order to open a discussion of her work among other critics. It is argued that Lord uses the multiple meanings of the word "green" and multiple perspectives concerning nature to complicate perspectives and perceptions of nature in order to develop a more responsible view towards the world. Some of these variant meanings of green nature are green money, green envy, and green naïveté. Because Nancy Lord provides multiple voices and interpretations of nature in *Green Alaska*, no single definition or perception can remain constant, and common perceptions and definitions of nature must be reconsidered. This exploration of various meanings creates a need for introspection. The important question becomes not "What does green mean?" but "Why does green mean whatever meaning we choose to assign it?" Uncertainty upsets the human desire for stability, and readers must then reconsider how they see the nonhuman world.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Nancy Lord for writing *Green Alaska*. I want to thank Derick Burleson for suggesting to me that I read it and write about it. I want to thank my professors Derick Burleson, Eric Heyne, and Roy Bird for their time, their advice, their expertise, and their general support. I would like to thank Wendy, my wife, for taking time off work so I could research and edit. I appreciate her support, and I would like to thank my son for taking naps during which I wrote this thesis. My sister-in-law Tiffany also did some editing. Thank you. My parents, grandparents, and in-laws have also been very supportive throughout the whole graduate school experience. Furthermore, I could not have written this without the support of the other graduate students in the English department at UAF. Thanks.

Introduction: *Green Alaska*

My first encounter with the literature of Nancy Lord ended in frustration. I knew she was an environmental writer (whatever that meant to me at the time), and I knew that she must also be a nature lover. I read her book anticipating a scathing rebuke of industry, American lifestyle, and careless gasoline recreation, but Lord claimed that she was unqualified to conclude that there was a single culprit to blame in the loss of beluga whales. In her book *Beluga Days* she says,

Pollution and noise from the [Cook] inlet's oil and gas industry, contamination from wastewater and runoff, vessel traffic and noise, conflicts with fisheries, food shortage, disease, predation by killer whales, habitat loss due to human population growth and community development, climate change, strandings: All these are cited by environmentalists as dangers to Cook Inlet belugas. (91)

She provides multiple perspectives but no simple answer, no single culprit, no clear path of action. I came to the book with my own point of view and my own expectations of what her book would do. When my expectations and her point of view did not match up, I was frustrated. "Contemporary nature writers," explains Scott Slovic, "tend to resist openly espousing one particular attitude toward nature, their goal being instead the empirical study of their own psychological responses to the world—or, in other words, objective scrutiny of subjective experience" (367). Lord's neutrality was an important choice regarding point of view. She chose objectivity rather than blatant activism, and this objectivity promotes awareness of the perceived problem.

The scientists she describes in *Beluga Days* provide a similar point of view. She says,

their jobs were to present their data, the hard science—not to interpret beyond what was scientifically established; not to speculate; not to warn; admonish, or advocate; not to determine what should be done with what they knew. Decisions were made by other people . . . those who weighed politics and economics along with science. (39)

Lord does what Slovic says contemporary nature writers do. She presents varying responses to the world so that they may be scrutinized. Slovic defends his interpretation of environmental writers' objectivity for fear it might be interpreted as lack of concern: "I would be remiss not to admit that there is, in the very concern for the human process of becoming alert to the nonhuman environment, an implicit belief that we need this awareness" (367). My own apprehension at Lord's lack of an accusation was put to rest once I understood the reasoning. Then I was prepared to read another one of Nancy Lord's books.

In her 1999 book *Green Alaska: Dreams from the Far Coast* Nancy Lord roughly follows, in a salmon tender, the route of the 1899 Harriman Alaska Expedition (H.A.E.) while she mentally follows the expedition in her journal. She and the tender's crew work their way from Homer's Kachemak Bay, along the Alaskan Peninsula to their fishing grounds where she departs her boat, the *M&M*, to visit a friend and to complete her contemplation of the Harriman journey in her writings. She ends the book in Washington

D.C. where she visits the Smithsonian Institute to view some of the resulting displays of the Harriman Expedition members' research and plunder.

On the original expedition and within the pages of Nancy Lord's book are men like John Burroughs, John Muir, C. Hart Merriam, George Bird Grinnel, Edward Curtis, William Dall, and Louis Agassiz Fuertes, among others who had prominent perspectives and voices. The perspectives of many of these men are quoted and described by Lord in her narrative. She also includes the perspectives of Henry David Thoreau, early white settlers of Alaska, modern fishermen, and Alaskan natives as she travels, writes, and describes. While her own voice is clear, a single, simplified perspective is not forced throughout the text.

In his argument for a Bakhtinian dialogical reading of ecological texts, Michael J. McDowell says,

Bakhtin names authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, and the speech of characters as means the writer employs to achieve an interplay of social voices and a variety of relationships among them. The effect is a kind of dialogue among differing points of view, which gives value to a variety of socio-ideological positions. Beginning with the idea that all entities in the great web of nature deserve recognition and a voice, an ecological literary criticism might explore how authors have represented the interaction of both the human and nonhuman voices in the landscape. (372)

McDowell's application of Bakhtin's ideas fits an interpretation of Nancy Lord's *Green Alaska* (among her other books of non-fiction) well, not only because she employs the voices of various environmental writers, but also because she considers nature as a place for reflection as well as for work and for play. Furthermore, her use of language allows for free play with word meanings. Instead of limiting point of view, perspective, and understanding, Lord allows for multiple, meaningful voices to emerge through her own narrative.

Lord's allowance of multiple distinct voices in her narratives creates conflict, but it shows the perception of nature in all its complexity. McDowell defends this choice of narrative technique. He argues that even though in speaking about nature, writers often try to speak for nature, this is valid: "We are beginning to recognize that Ruskin's 'pathetic fallacy,' the crediting of natural objects with human qualities, is not merely a Romantic indulgence, but an inevitable component of human perception; it is something to acknowledge and celebrate, not condemn" (373). Although Lord resists personifying nature, she recognizes the human tendency to enforce human ideas, needs, greeds, and perceptions onto the non-human world and criticizes it herself. Her own views seem to contradict other humans' perceived needs and points of view. Once again, McDowell explains:

Dialogics helps first by placing an emphasis on contradictory voices, rather than focusing mainly upon the authoritative monologic in the narrator. We begin to hear characters and elements of the landscape that have been marginalized. Our attention is directed to the differences in the

kind of language associated with specific characters or elements of the landscape. (374)

It is important that these previously unheard voices become heard. Annette Kolodny argues in “Unearthing Herstory: An Introduction” that “what we need is a radically new symbolic mode for relating to [the land]; we can no longer afford to keep turning ‘American the Beautiful’ into *America the Raped*” (178). This is because a three-hundred-year tradition of discussing the American landscape includes what Kolodny calls

[a] cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless integral satisfaction. (171)

Enforcing a single meaning onto the landscape and the rest of non-human nature by a single voice is a continuation of the metaphor of the land as female that must be subdued. This is what Kolodny says must change. This is what does change when multiple perspectives are expressed in a single narrative.

Because Lord provides multiple voices and interpretations of nature in *Green Alaska*, no single definition or perception can remain constant, and common perceptions and definitions of nature must be reconsidered. According to Kolodny, a new perspective is exactly what humans and the rest of nature need: “The magic, and even salvation of man may, after all, lie in his capacity to enter into and exit from the images by which, periodically, he seeks to explore and codify the meaning of his experience” (178). In this

case, language, and literature, and their application to the real world must show self-consciousness and reflection in order to demonstrate their own weaknesses and potential inaccuracies and in order to be able to attain a more truthful point of view. Lord does this by self-consciously presenting conflict in points of view, in word meaning, and in behaviors toward landscape.

William Howarth supports this sort of complexity in language and its application to ecological literature. He says, "*Ecocriticism* is a name that implies more ecological literacy than its advocates now possess" (69). He toys with the etymological roots of the words "eco" and "critic" "in the hope that they will raise some questions about ecocriticism and its future. If its political agenda insists on an Us-Them dichotomy, then ecocriticism cannot be self-scrutinizing, only adversarial" (69). Although allowance of multiple voices, meanings, perspectives and interpretations can be unpopular in a world that seeks definite answers and concrete descriptions of reality, Michael McDowell argues that "The tentativeness and the willingness to be taught by the ways of the natural world, two qualities typical to landscape writing, combine with this 'open-endedness' to suggest not only a sense of the writer's humility but also an ethical stance that recognizes that no individual and no era have a monopoly on truth" (376). Lord takes this type of ethical stance in her book *Green Alaska* by unlocking the meaning of the word "green." Green is not only the color of nature; it is the color of money, human attitudes, and human desires. Furthermore, it is not the only color of nature. Nature is blue skies, blue water, bluebells, forget-me-nots, lupine, purple rhododendrons, iris, delicate yellow

ladies' slippers, golden plovers, and red-vested bumblebees. Nature is streaky pink clouds, rainbows, and brown bears. Nature is not limited to that which is green.

It is important to remember that the rest of the world exists on its own whether humans are watching it or not, whether humans are writing down what is out there or not. Non-human nature exists outside human perception and description. Scott Slovic reminds us that humans do not have all the answers. He says, "What especially interests me, though, is the implication that even when we feel certain we *know* our natural environment, we probably do not—we may not even have really looked at it" (356). Furthermore, when humans do look at the world, we tend to force our own understanding onto that which exists without our perception. Slovic argues that as people we see and describe the world clearly even when we only understand it vaguely; we also use that which is familiar to describe that which is unfamiliar, "In other words, rather than attending fully and freshly to each new experience when we look at the world, we tend to rely upon previously stored information" (355-56). He calls this using "best guesses" to describe the world (356). A writer who lets different perceptions of nature be seen throughout her own work acknowledges the limited nature of human beings, and although such a writer may lose traditional notions of power and authority, that writer is writing authentically and ethically. Nancy Lord does so by not pinning meaning down in her book and limiting perceptions of nature to her own point of view.

Green is more than a color in Nancy Lord's *Green Alaska*. Ambiguity is implied from the very beginning. The first chapter's title, "Slant," carries this multiplicity of meanings with multiple meanings of its own. The slant of the title is Nancy Lord's

particular point of view on the subject. She leads into this with the appropriate subjective words and phrases: “imagine this” and “likely” (3). She is preparing readers to receive an interpretation of the world. The title “Slant” also refers to the squint in her eyes as she strains to see the town of Homer in the distance, “as Burroughs did” (5). This sort of slanting of the eyes distorts the lens in a way that allows a person to see differently that which is already difficult to see with the unaided eye. However, at the same time that Lord is introducing her particular slant on the subject at hand, she introduces the points of view of several other people, thus adding more slants to the subject (perhaps balancing her own slant with a more well-rounded, researched point of view). She introduces the perspectives of John Burroughs and of the unnamed woman original to the first European-American settlement of Homer. She introduces a historical perspective with precise numbers and descriptions from old sources. By the end of the chapter, Lord’s slant appears pretty even, pretty well-balanced; however, in naming the chapter so, Lord recognizes the inherent biases, interpretations, and other phenomena that create space for differing perspectives in titling a researched and well-thought out chapter “Slant.”

Furthermore, it seems clear that her own slant will be politically “green,” but Lord’s situation as a fisherman who lives off the land, combined with her use of research, demand that her point of view take a different slant than many people might expect. Lord may be politically “green,” but she will recognize someone else’s right to hunt, to wear fur, or to eat meat even though to another environmentalist these actions might be taboo. It is clear that Lord defies stereotypical slants. Meaning is not locked down in a single person’s notion of “green;” neither are points of view limited by simple labels.

It seems to be the nature of much nature writing to contradict itself because nature allows contradicting elements to co-exist. And contradictory meanings, perspectives, and beliefs are often all contained within single words, as is the case with “green.” These conflicting elements are interrelated, however. One shapes the other, creates another, feeds one, and destroys two in the process. Green naïveté about nature’s interdependence often leads to greed for converting nature into green money, which in turn leads to envy of the past, which fuels the green political movement. Furthermore, green is not limited by this simple list. Green is a predominant color in the environment, and within that living world there are various shades of green, not only in Alaska but in other settings as well.

The short title of Nancy Lord’s *Green Alaska* is just one word short of an exact imitation of John Burroughs’ narrative of his 1899 cruise around Alaska: *In Green Alaska*. That one word, those two letters, makes all the difference. The preposition “in” serves the function of locating his narrative in space and/or time. John Burroughs’ work is clearly set “in green Alaska” as demonstrated by the word choice in the title. Lord’s narrative is, on the contrary, cut loose from the restrictions of space and time. Her green Alaska, free from the preposition, is free from these constraints. The complete title of Nancy Lord’s book is *Green Alaska: Dreams from the Far Coast*. The juxtaposition of “green” and “dreams” within the title is important because the two words can contain some of each other. Freud speculated that dreams were expressions of envy or desire: green. Envy can be directed towards the abundance of wealth found in the environment; it can be greedy, money-hungry: green. Human daydreams are often not rational

thoughts. They are simplistic, naïve: green. The word “far” also plays with the possible meanings of the title. To Lord, the Alaskan coast is certainly not the “far coast”; however, this is the term she employs. What is this coast far from? Far from the eastern United States where so much literature is centered? Far from the Californian coast where so many movies’ plots are based? Perhaps the far coast is far from our ordinary expectations, far from our perceptions of reality.

The role played by ambiguity in the interpretation of the green of *Green Alaska* is similar to that played by objectivity in *Beluga Days*. Although subjective words infiltrate the title of the book and its chapters, such as “Dreams from the Far Coast,” “Slant,” and “Artistic License,” an exact meaning for the word “green” cannot be attached to the book. The multiplicity of possible meanings allows for word play within the text, and an exploration of various meanings creates a need for introspection. The important question becomes not “What does green mean?” but “Why does green mean whatever meaning we choose to assign it?” Uncertainty upsets the human desire for stability, and readers then must reconsider how they see the nonhuman world.

Chapter 1: *Green Alaska*: green money

People do not all see the same thing when they look at the world around them. As an extreme, but clear, example: two people stand in an apple orchard. One of them sees the apples growing on the trees and sees food: crisp red, juicy, sweet food. He imagines plucking an apple off of a tree, shining it on his shirt, breaking the skin of the apple with his teeth while the juices run into the corners of his mouth, and then slowly masticating the apple into a sweet pulp and filling his belly. The other person sees the apples as money: crisp green folding money, numbers on a ledger, an investment in the future. He imagines providing jobs for the economy, hiring people to pluck the apples off the trees, filling bushel after bushel, and shipping those bushels through a paid distributor off to a market where hungry people will pay green money for red apples. The example could be repeated with slight variation as two people consider a pine forest. One person sees green trees, a pretty place to take a walk, a home for animals, the great outdoors, a place to live and be. The other person sees resources: un-pulped paper, unbuilt houses, uncut lumber, potential money. Or in the words of Paul Collins, “[he] quite literally can’t see the forest for the woodchips” (Collins).

Once again, these examples are extreme. Many people will see these possibilities and a thousand shades of in-between; however, the examples illustrate a point: different people see the world differently and appreciate the earth and its non-human inhabitants in different ways. The multiplicity of perspectives goes in all directions and presents an extremely complicated variety of manners to view the world. One of those ways to view the world sees that nature equals money.

One could argue that Alaska's existence as a state is a consequence of viewing the natural world simply as a source of revenue. America has constantly moved its frontier farther and farther west as "unlimited" resources have been over-taxed, run out, or become controlled by a single person or group. The boundaries of what people consider wilderness and what they consider human territory have moved according to economic need. Nature and indigenous people become obstacles to obtaining the great wealth that nature possesses. This perspective is still in force today because it is convenient for politicians to call upon the development of resources as a means of securing reelection by providing jobs for the state at the expense of the environment. In a recent speech to the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Governor Frank Murkowski expressed this point of view: "We [the state government] need you [the university] to prioritize your research to help us develop our resources," thus making the University a tool of the state for turning nature into money (qtd. in *News-Miner* A1). The writer of the article in the *Daily News-Miner* summarized the governor's ideas in this way: "Murkowski said he was especially interested in turning UAF's attention to efforts by the administration to expand production of oil and gas and other resources" (*News-Miner* A1).

Eric Heyne explains that "The West had to be not inhabited but invented. The frontier was less a demographic threshold or the line of trees at the edge of town than an advertisement for free land out West and a sermon about what lay beyond the trees" (3). Governor Murkowski's desire to develop Alaska's oil and gas is a consequence of this sort of reinvention of the frontier, in this case according to economic desire. Instead of counting the cost on nature of the development of resources, unused nature is unused

money, and, therefore, untouched nature is a waste of money. Because oil, gas, gold, and other parts of nature are so directly related to the current economic game, they are just piles of money, not parts of nature, sitting under the dirt not collecting interest. This point of view is related to the metaphors we use to describe nature, particularly the metaphor of the virgin land. Heyne says, "As the virgin is both desirable and useless in the male gaze, so the frontier is both a sacred site and a waste of untapped resources, and the desert is both a place to shun and a space to fill" (5).

Within the shades of green in Nancy Lord's *Green Alaska* is the green dollar of the United States of America. Money is often at the heart of environmental disputes because it too shapes and shades how human beings perceive the world and, therefore, how they do or do not use its resources. Money shows its color everywhere that somebody asks a question of use value. It colors the picture every time an animal, or a plant, or a place is put under governmental protection. Nancy Lord shows the involvement of money in shaping life and perspective in Alaska in an infinite loop of connections, thus complicating the natural green scene with humans' other green life source.

She invokes the name of money in the first line of the introduction:

Here is a man, the Bill Gates of a century ago—in 1899 perhaps the richest man in America. Edward Harriman, president of the Union Pacific Railroad, can afford to do absolutely anything he wants on the vacation his doctor insists he must take. If it were technically feasible, he might fly to the moon. (xv)

The association with Bill Gates is effective in characterizing the nowadays lesser-known Harriman. Bill Gates means money, and Lord insists that money must be an issue in any situation involving such men because money allows them the leisure to go where they want and do what they want. In the case of Harriman, his money provided a way for him to visit the far off and relatively unknown land of Alaska in a time when few others could afford to see it by cruise ship. His money allowed him to provide for scientific, artistic, and recreational pursuits on the trip (xv). His money also provided a means for publishing the writings about the trip (166). The fact that anyone can read about the Harriman Alaska Expedition, including the discoveries of the scientists, the narrations of the artists, and the discussions of the people on board, is owed to money. Money made the trip possible. Money made the results publishable. Money made possible the advancement of science and art. Money overcame the obstacles of distance, limited resources, and time. Because the world was able to learn from these writings, it is arguable that Alaska is a different place, and more specifically, that Lord is a different person (165). Because of Harriman and the work that he funded, Nancy Lord reconsiders her own life; because of Harriman and his money and the journey it made possible, she has a historical event to retrace and can provide insight and discussion in an effort to change the world's perception of nature. While *Green Alaska* shows the relationship of money in shaping human perceptions of nature, it is not a criticism of money itself, but rather a criticism of a point of view that sees nature as money. It is also a demonstration of the interconnectedness of money with humans and the rest of nature. Money is only part of the picture.

Lord shows how economic value placed on specific parts of nature shapes more than individuals. Her chapter “The Price of Otters” shows how a dollar price on the sea otter’s pelt changes job markets, cultures, plant life, and animal life—basically entire ecosystems. She begins with an ironic emphasis on the otter’s scarcity. As she observes an otter she sees “in its expression something [she] interpret[s] as part curiosity, part disdain. It sees more of [her] kind than [she] sees of its” (9). Although Lord does not state it, scarcity, economically speaking, is what makes value increase. In this case, the abundant humans would be less valuable than the non-abundant otters, that is, if we were to put a price on living creatures. But these possible conclusions are unstated and subtle, and Lord’s narration discusses price beyond a dollar amount.

Lord contrasts the single otter with the absolute lack of otters that she first observed when she moved into the area, a lack which proves the *ecological* value of the otter as “a ‘Keystone’ species, one that holds up the roof over the rest of us; where there are otters, there will be other species, diversity, some measure of environmental health” (9). Because otters eat the smaller animals that eat the kelp that provides all of the animals with food, shelter, and oxygen, they are valuable in maintaining a balance between large animals, small animals, and plants (9). The otter’s scarcity is harmful to the natural world.

The ecological value of the otter in its natural habitat stands in contrast to the dollar values that pepper the rest of the chapter. Lord describes ecologies beyond that of Kachemak Bay where she spots the otter in her narrative. In the past, the desire for fur in clothing markets drove up the amount of hunting in Alaska. An increased demand for

hunters led Russian fur hunters to enslave the Aleut people who lived with the otters on the coasts of Alaska. Increased hunting and hunters in Alaska decreased the number of fur-bearing otters. A decrease in the number of otters increased the dollar price at which they were purchased. In 1899, when the effects of the otter scarcity were driving down the availability of otter pelts, people like Edward Harriman paid an inflated \$500 for a single skin (10). Lord drops more numbers onto the page:

The early Chinese mandarins, shopping with the Russians, were said to spend the equivalent of \$5,000 for a single skin. In 1910, skins fetched \$2,000 each on the London Market. Five hundred dollars at a time when \$2.50 was a working man's daily wage would equate to something like \$20,000 today. (11)

Lord does not say that money is the problem; she shows that greed is the problem; vanity is the problem, and a point of view that places strictly a dollar value on nature has far reaching consequences.

The interconnectedness between the otter and the human world of dollars and cents continues. A \$500 (or \$20,000) otter became so hard to find that, eventually, it was no longer profitable to hunt them. This in turn led to the disenfranchisement of the Aleut people who had been enslaved by the market and "need" for otters. Furthermore, the scarcity of the otter brought about a change in international behavior. In 1910, a treaty protected the otters from commercial hunting (10), not, however, without first having damaged the lives of the Aleut people and the land on which they lived.

Lord further demonstrates the effects of the nature-equals-money perspective on the natural world with a discussion of a more modern price of otters: the price of saving a single otter after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill—\$80,000 (11). The dollar-cost to the company involved could easily have been nothing. If only the event had occurred years before environmental laws had been made, the boat captain and the oil company could have admitted their mistake and promised to be more careful in the future. However, the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill occurred in a time when humans have decided to view nature in more than monetary terms, and the company had to accept a deeper responsibility towards nature. Ironically, the non-business appreciation of the living world in this case also has a dollar price. And the harm done to the environment hurts more than just the animals because fishing and recreation are also affected by the spill. Using nature as a source of resource and revenue affects the non-human creatures of the natural world, and an appreciation for the non-human creatures of the natural world costs the business-seeking humans time and money. They are interrelated. However, the perspective of nature as a source of resources and revenue can improve. Lord's choice of words in describing the action of the oil tanker—"dumped"—implies clumsiness, carelessness. The implication is a reminder that money will not fix the problems that the natural world faces. Behavior will. Just as the view of nature-as-money is too simple, the view of money-as-solution is too simple. The "drunk skipper" who ran the oil tanker aground (27), hurting the otters, among other plant and animal life, would not have necessarily been persuaded by higher fines for environmental damage or even a higher price on oil because nature simply does not equal money.

The money-nature relationship in Nancy Lord's discussion of otters has one more twist that connects the price of otters in the nineteenth century to nature and human lifestyle near the end of the twentieth century. Lord writes, "Today perhaps 100,000 sea otters live in Alaska's waters. Commercial hunting of them has been forbidden since 1911, but under federal law Alaska Natives may take otters to use the furs themselves or make them into handicrafts for sale" (11). Sealskin mukluks trimmed in otter fur sell for \$500 in the museum in Homer, Alaska, and are available to another moneymaking force that shapes the environment in Alaska: the tourist. The dilemma is complicated by the knowledge that the unwilling Aleut participants of the nineteenth-century fur trade are still involved, and laws that simply ban otter hunting to protect the species from extinction due to non-native hunting are not fair. Neither the pursuit of green nature nor green money can take precedence over the other because there are more than two sides to the issue. Thus, the seemingly simple issue of the price of otter skins is revealed in its true, complex form. Economy, the environment, community, and culture are all interrelated. Green economical problems are also green ecological problems, and one cannot simply be solved without affecting the others.

Forester and scholar Gifford Pinchot takes a more moderate stance than a simple nature-equals-money view while still acknowledging that the perspective has validity. He argues that the belief that nature is money will motivate people to take better care of nature:

The conservation of our natural resources is a question of primary importance on the economic side. It pays better to conserve our natural

resources than to destroy them, and this is especially true when the national interest is considered. But the business reason, weighty and worthy though it be, is not the fundamental reason. In such matters, business is a poor master but a good servant. The law of self-preservation is higher than the law of business, and the duty of preserving the Nation is higher than either. (166)

While he promotes ideas like “manifest destiny” that have led to thoughtless over-development of land and resources, Pinchot believes that ultimately people’s desire to preserve the United States and to preserve the American way of life will depend on their ability to preserve natural resources because freedom, independence, energy, and life come from those natural resources. He believes that with attention to the future, people can develop the natural (162), prevent waste (163) and thereby conserve the earth, or “our descendants will suffer the penalty of our neglect” (167). He says, “[Conservation] is a vital question of profit, but what is still more vital, it is a question of national safety and patriotism also” (166).

The only problem is that the environment does not recognize the arbitrary borders drawn by human beings around their land, and even though a natural resource lies outside the borders of a country’s land, the people of that country can and will be affected by the way that resource is used or abused by other people. This weakness in Pinchot’s point of view is clearly demonstrated by Nancy Lord in *Green Alaska* as she shows that both otter hunting and whaling were businesses driven by international markets and were only

stopped by international treaty not individual attention to the future of the market or the country.

Pinchot's efforts were responsible for the foundation of the U.S. Forest Service of which he was the first chief; however, his philosophies were in direct contrast to the ideas of other people who felt that conservation that included economic development was not enough to protect the earth (Hott et. al.). In particular, John Muir fought for preservation over conservation, an idea which rejects the point of view that nature is money, or perhaps more clearly posits that economy is not a sufficient motivation to take adequate care of nature. Aldo Leopold, a graduate of the Pinchot school of forestry at Yale, agrees: "One basic weakness in a conservation system based wholly on economic motives is that most members of the land community have no economic value" (186). Leopold argues that the difference between "profitable to the community" and "profitable to themselves" provides one clear choice to the people who make their living off the land (185). A system regulated by self-interest will provide attention to the individual and not the community, and conservation will not take place (185). He explains further that

Some species of trees have been "read out of the party" by economics-minded foresters because they grow too slowly, or have too low a sale value to pay as timber crops. . . . In Europe, where forestry is ecologically more advanced, the non-commercial tree species are recognized as members of the native forest community, to be preserved as such, within reason. . . . The interdependence of the forest and its constituent tree species, ground flora, and fauna is taken for granted. (187)

Just as the otters in the 1800s were valued for the dollar price that could be fetched by their pelts, as Nancy Lord describes, other living species have been and are perceived according to their short-term economic value. Lord's examples show what Aldo Leopold asserts: "To sum up: a system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore, and thus eventually to eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are (as far as we know) essential to its healthy functioning" (188).

The perception of nature-as-money is shortsighted and ultimately destructive of nature because it lacks respect for other living creatures and neglects the interdependence of one living being with every other living being around it. This is made clear in "The Price of Otters"; however, it is repeated in the two fox chapters in Nancy Lord's *Green Alaska*. First, she describes the vision of M. L. Washburn. In the time of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, Washburn decided to populate some of Alaska's many "unoccupied" islands, as he called them, with breeding foxes (55). Fox farmers could feed the animals with relatively free salmon and seal meat. Three sentence-length paragraphs punctuate the page: "The pelts sell for, on average, twenty dollars apiece. / The foxes breed quickly. / There is enormous wealth to be made" (56). The lines are short and simple, as if they speak for themselves. Lord emphasizes the faulty foundation of the idea by letting the short paragraphs hang in the air above the rest of the text. Washburn's plan fills a void in the economy. Natives who can no longer hunt the depopulated otters and seals, who can no longer depend on previously abundant salmon runs, "can find excellent employment in this new industry" (56).

One hundred years later, the farms are gone, the dream of easy money through fox fur is gone, and many birds that once populated the islands are gone (95). Lord's descriptive phrases mock the folly of viewing nature as money. The false nature that fox farmers created with the perspective that nature would easily make them money could not sustain itself. The other living creatures on the islands were crowded out by the foxes, and the high fox population could not support itself as Washburn dreamed. Lord's comparison of the fox dream to a "pyramid scheme" uses the familiar business flop of 1999 and applies it to its 1899 corollary (95). The use of the biblical phrase "be fruitful and multiply" quietly questions the application of God's commandment to Adam and Eve in the book of *Genesis* to the world of business (95).

Washburn's dream of easy money overshadows the realities of environmental capacity. What he sees as "unoccupied and now useless" islands do not have the unlimited capacity that he believes they do (55-56). Lord illustrates the unnatural nature of this plan in her imagined disdain that her parallel nature writer John Burroughs shows towards the man. As she recounts the plans of Washburn, her imaginary version of Burroughs is captured by the beauty of the fox's dark fur rather than its possible market value, and then he is distracted again by a magpie (57). In a gentle and imaginative way, she shows that the economic appeal of the islands and the appeal of the intrinsic beauty of the other animals on those islands strike different people with differing levels of importance.

Ironical to Lord is one level that John Burroughs seems to miss while he describes his Alaskan journey. When he stops at a cannery in the Prince William Sound, he

describes his impressions of the “skill and swiftness” of the cannery workers but neglects to notice the methods of the fishermen (77). George Bird Grinnell does notice and later condemns the fisheries for their greed and waste (78). In the time of the Harriman expedition, rivers were blocked off entirely, all fish were caught, unwanted fish were thrown out and wasted, and although the fishing industry made a lot of money, few fish escaped to reproduce to ensure the future of the animals (Lord 78). Lord explains, “Their motto, Grinnell said, seemed to be: *If I do not take all I can get somebody else will get something*” (78). The nature-is-money perspective created an incredibly efficient fishery, one that so impressed John Burroughs as to take his attention away from the waste of life, but efficiency is not valuable by itself. Lord rants at the end of the chapter, “I want to shake Burroughs, official trip historian. *Look* at what’s in front of you! Tell the world about it! *Enough* about the admirable skills of the Chinese fish cutters!” (79). Her final description of Burroughs walking off into “his sweet-smelling woods, following the song of a hermit thrush” criticizes Burroughs’ attitude that seems to say “as long as I have my woods, everything else is OK.” At the same time, Lord seems to say that nature indiscriminately converted into money in one place, endangers nature everywhere.

Among the more poignant reminders that Lord provides against the perspective that green nature equals green money is the discussion she provides on rainbows. She asks, “What was it Burroughs wrote of rainbows? A rainbow is ‘one of the most lovely and wonderful things in nature, and yet it serves no purpose in nature; it has no use’” (42). She mocks the mind set that allows for such a classification and that allows people to see nature as anything but what it really is: “What a curious concept, I think—dividing the

natural world and its phenomena into the useful and the not-useful...Useless rainbow!

As useless as ripples on water, as streaky pink clouds, as the sound of rain. Who can live without these?" (42). In this case, Burroughs provides Lord with a clear contrast in perceptions of nature, one that allows her to colorfully illustrate the futility of perceiving nature as money and alludes to rainbow chasers who grasp uselessly at what is not there (42).

In other parts of the text, the development of the point of view that nature equals money proceeds subtly as a discussion on whale hunting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Lord describes the crew of the Harriman expedition watching whales on the deck of their ship, the *Elder*, and then says,

I picture the Harriman women, traipsing out onto glaciers in their long skirts. Of what were their corset stays and skirt hoops made, and their umbrella handles? For centuries there had been nothing else in the world so flexible and resilient as baleen. . . . [O]nly when whales became too rare and baleen too expensive were merchandisers forced to invent substitutes. (64)

The "need" for fashionable clothing supported the hunting of whales. Nature was converted into a product, and the need for a product that was in high demand drove a money-hungry market to hunt grey whales to near extinction (64). Lord's style, however, is not to directly accuse and berate the women of the past nor ignorant consumers of present products harmful to non-human nature. She quietly calls attention to a few

lesser-known facts, ones that if more people were aware of, might make a difference in what they purchased.

Lord's criticism of the nature-as-money point of view does not close her eyes to the fact that, as inhabitants of earth, humans will have an impact on the planet, or to the fact that to survive, all of human work, energy, production, and food must somehow come from the earth, whether directly or indirectly. Lord writes the book on board a commercial fishing ship while she is working as a commercial fisherman. However, she provides a model of life as work and of work as art that maintains a healthy interrelationship with the earth and counters the idea that nature is money or that people work for money. Her explanation follows her description of the fishing process that she takes part in. She says,

This is a romantic vision, yes, that we cling to, men and women working the sea in this time-honored fashion. Not many do it like this anymore, one fish at a time. It is not the most efficient way, certainly, nor the easiest or safest. But the salmon fisherman knows an art, and he knows about weather and whales and plankton blooms—all those connecting things that make up the salmon's world, and his own. (113)

But Lord's example is only persuasive to those who agree that a person works for a living and not for money. It is only persuasive if a person can connect to the land in the same way that she demonstrates in her narrative. It is this ethos that Lord develops and expresses in her lifestyle as a fisherman living and working in the same place that

overcomes the nature-is-money attitude expressed by others in other moments in the narrative.

Lord argues against simplicity in points of view in her description of the fishing grounds and a fisherman's lifestyle. Compartmentalization of knowledge, understanding, and points of view limit the capability to understand. She says,

This is my sober thought: we have come so far from the time when a William Dall could excel not only in a broad range of the sciences but also in history, geography, anthropology, writing and understanding. Our gain in specialization is also our loss, until perhaps only small-scale fishermen and their kind are left as the generalists who see things whole—and who will defend not their disciplines but our lives. (114)

A person who works where she lives, and lives more directly off of what she works, will understand the environmental costs of living better than a person who lives off the land less directly, a person who works for money and pays money for his food without considering his connection to the land. The person with a direct relationship sees the effects directly and pays for the effects with changes in lifestyle. In this way, nature is life; nature is not money.

Farmer and writer Wendell Berry, in his critique of culture and agriculture, supports this ethos developed in Nancy Lord's lifestyle and demonstrated in *Green Alaska*. He says, "If a culture is to hope for any considerable longevity, then the relationships within it must, in recognition of their interdependence, be predominantly cooperative rather than competitive" (47). He argues that a disconnection between

worker and land, home and workplace will lead to less concern for the land and therefore less care for it (74). Thus, a point of view that accepts nature as money is destructive not only of the environment but also of our desire to do anything about the environment.

Lord continues to effectively counter the perception of nature-as-money through a story about John Muir in the chapter "Wilderness." The hunters of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, looking for bears, followed the advice of Muir and went looking for a bear to kill in a place he called "Howling Valley," a place where nature forces its interpretation upon a person rather than letting a person perceive it in his own way, or as Nancy Lord describes it, "A person didn't stroll about here and admire the views; a person stood in awe, had to feel his smallness, his insignificance" (136-37). Although not all places in nature force their perception upon human beings, both Muir and Lord argue for such an experience. Lord says of Muir, "he understood this about wild places: that their values lay not in what could be conquered but in the humility they forced upon man. He knew we needed such places, would always need them, not as warehouses of goods but as temples for our souls" (137).

Lord's ultimate allegiance to Muir and his perception of nature, which contradicts the view of nature as money, is strategically revealed near the end of her book. The revelation appropriately appears after a description of a modern view of nature as money: the use of nature to attract big-spending, abundant tourists who come to see nature but do not want it to get in the way of their fancy dinners and parties (153). Lord's revelation brings closure to many of the conflicting perceptions of nature that appear throughout the book. Postponing the announcement of her membership in the oftentimes controversial

Sierra Club buys her the time she needs to persuade anyone entirely convinced that nature is money to understand that nature is not money and that people can know that and still live and work on the earth.

Chapter 2: *Green Alaska*: green envy

Another shade in the green of Nancy Lord's *Green Alaska* is the green of envy, or as Iago says in Shakespeare's *Othello*, "jealousy . . . the green-eyed monster" (III.iii.88-89). There is no doubt that much environmental writing contains some form of jealousy¹ or envy of the past, for the world as it was, perhaps for non-human nature before humans came in and messed it all up. Sadness for the destructive relationship that humans have often had with the rest of nature can lead people to forget that humans are also part of nature; therefore, a simplified envy of nature before humans came and messed it up demonstrates an incomplete view of the picture. Ironically, our current nature-friendly points of view would probably not exist without the destructive past that we lament. Not only do we desire to have the world the way it was, we desire to have people with a mindset that evolved from the destructive past living in that better world that we imagine. Our current enlightenment has its source in our destructive past. Our current generosity toward nature stems from our past greed. We envy the world that we do not have, that we cannot have because our forbearers were greedy. We tell ourselves, "if we had the earth the way it was before it was strip-mined, dust-bowled, clear-cut, crop-dusted, and bull-dozed, we would treat it differently. We would not misuse it." This envy of the past is itself a sort of greed. This indignation towards the wasters of the past is self-righteous

¹ A strict definition of the word jealousy requires a rival relationship between lovers. In the case of environmental writing, the nature lover is in love with the world as she wants it to be; however, the world as it currently is comes between them.

and easily justified. Those of us who have not, envy those who had and wasted.

Unfortunately, it is easy to be an idealist about a world that we do not have anymore.

Nancy Lord's use of envy is not so simple. It is a part of the green in *Green Alaska*, but only part. She expresses this envy clearly in the introduction to her book as she dreams and imagines her way along the coast of Alaska in both the past and the present tenses through the narratives of both John Burroughs and herself. She claims, "The country we will pass is thinly inhabited and little developed—as unchanged today as any of the coastline the Harriman expedition followed" (xx). She then modifies the claim: "What better place [than a boat] and time could there possibly be to contemplate this amazing land, an Alaska that still lives in most people's minds, if they think of it at all, in an imaginary realm?" (xx). As the narrative unfolds, it seems that the belief that Alaska remains unchanged is part of that imaginary world, part of a desire to believe that there is still a part of America, or of the world, that has not been overused, overpopulated, over-fished, over-mined, and over-visited. Lord's comparison of her descriptions with Burroughs' descriptions shows a clear difference, and the idea that nature presently exists in Alaska similarly to how it existed in the past is only an envious desire for that which is not completely true.

Lord calls this feeling a "panging regret" for "paradise lost" (4). Speaking of Homer, she explains,

I have seen the town go from one halibut charter business to this enormous fleet, from dirt streets to a speedy bypass and a McDonald's. The realization comes to me as a shock: I have lived here for fully one-quarter

of the time that has passed since the Harriman expedition stopped by. No wonder so much has changed. (4)

The increase of one kind of green in Alaska, green dollars for the economy, at the same time increases another kind of green, envy of the clean and idyllic past.

Another source of Lord's conflict within this same chapter comes also from the past. One of the founding members of Lord's hometown had described Homer as "desolate" (5). Lord counters, "*Desolate* is not a word I would ever have put to this place, however unwelcoming those early wayfarers and then Burroughs and his fellow expeditioners may have found it" (5). Her envy of the past does not extend to the attitudes and visions of the people of the past, but only to the world the past contains. Lord expresses her envy of the natural world of the past by removing the present: "Edit out the fuel tanks, the roads clogged with motorhomes, the boardwalks and shops and all the industrial development, and the place becomes for me, a long beach littered with driftwood, waving grasses hiding the nests of eiders, luxurious green hills beyond" (5). Then, she says, "even in winter, or especially in winter" she finds the land beautiful, "achingly lovely" (5). Her description then returns to the biblical symbol of a desire for a past place which is out of reach: Eden. To her, Homer is "edenic" (5). She says, "I want to believe that a hundred years ago I would have fallen all over myself in love with it," once again emphasizing the difference between her present perception of a place changed by time and commerce and the past perceptions of a land then less affected by European-American development (5).

Lord's conflict with the desirable non-human nature of the past and its past inhabitants' undesirable descriptions of that nature continues: "five times I find Burroughs comparing this treeless green country to tended lawns" (90). This domesticated view of nature is a source of her frustration. She says,

I see the same green splendor, the same openness that Burroughs saw, and I adore it, too—for entirely different associations and near-opposite reasons. I look upon these achingly green islands and see not lawns and farms, nothing tame or domesticated, but wildness. What I see is seamlessly green and tirelessly unrolling, untracked by man or woman or domestic beast, not tended, not mown, not made "useful." (90)

Again, she uses the word "achingly." The reference to pain and beauty together in this single adjective emphasizes the difference in perspective from past to present. Use value, of course, is part of this difference and another source of conflicting definitions of green. Generally, and too often, the root of the past view of non-human nature is a question of usefulness, of value in terms of green money. This is related to the green envy that people of the present feel. The world as it was before it was converted into money (wild) is enviable.

Lord confronts this envy in the central chapter of the book: "Green." In this chapter she surprisingly finds herself agreeing with Burroughs as she analyzes her feelings toward the environment and the past. First she explains his point of view:

Burroughs spent his life trying to re-create a rural past, both on his small farm and in his books. According to his biographers, he felt a tremendous,

painful nostalgia for the rural life he had known as a boy, and for what he thought was his country's enviable and irretrievable agrarian history. . . .

When Burroughs's son was born, he wrote in sadness, "I look upon this baby of mine and think how late he has come into this world—how much he has missed; what a faded and delapidated [sic] inheritance he has come into possession of." (91)

This passage is painfully ironic to anyone who feels that the world of today is in such a state and that the world of John Burroughs is enviable. As Lord states in the beginning of her book, in nearly one-quarter of the time that has passed since Burroughs visited Alaska, she has witnessed more change and loss of nature than he could have, and it shocks even her.

What also shocks Lord is her eventual association with Burroughs' nostalgic descriptions, which she at one point says are "romanticized to the point of being depressive" (91). She explains that Burroughs' sadness over the faded world that he is passing on to his son is "so similar to what [she has] always felt" (91). She then clarifies her specific envy or longing, as she classifies it:

Not a longing for a rural or farm past, but for an even older and rarer time. Growing up, I always felt that I had missed out by being born much too late to have known real wilderness. I dreamed of canoeing on lakes before they were surrounded by summer homes and zoomed over by speedboats, of standing on mountaintops and seeing nothing but trees and more mountains, or walking through hidden valleys to discover canyons, cliffs,

hot springs that I had never known could exist. Wild pigeons, buffalo herds, big cats, tall waving prairie grasses—I wanted it all. I wanted to be Lewis and Clark and Sacajawea. (91)

The setting of Nancy Lord's *Green Alaska* is in conflict with itself. It exists somewhere between the Alaska that was, as John Burroughs describes it; the Alaska that is, as Nancy Lord describes it; and an Alaska that might be, as Lord envisions it. On the topic of time and literature Mikhail Bakhtin says, "great works continue to live in the distant future. In the process of their posthumous life they are enriched with new meanings" (quoted in McDowell 374). Critic Michael McDowell applies Bakhtin's idea to environmental literature: "such an approach is fitting for ecologically oriented literature, for it leads to the discovery of connections between a literary work and its past, present, and future environments" (374). This seems to be what Lord provides in her narrative. In *Green Alaska*, the conflict between time periods is important in establishing the setting. Envy, and desire in general, play a key role in creating that conflict. This conflict created by envy and jealousy for the past is necessary. It creates difference; difference is necessary for any sort of distinction and recognition to take place. Furthermore, just as Burroughs' narrative lives on in Lord's narrative and his description of Alaska in the past is important to her description of Alaska in the present, Lord's present description of Alaska will live in the distant future because it prompts the questions "will this land remain the same, or is Lord describing something that will cause jealousy in future Alaskan writers?"

In "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf comments specifically on jealousy and writing. In her own admitted state of jealousy for the past, she inquires as to whether one could find living poets who could compare to great writers now gone. She says,

Obviously it is impossible . . . looking into those foaming waters, to compare them. The very reason why that poetry excites one to such abandonment, such rapture, is that it celebrates some feeling that one used to have, so that one responds easily, familiarly, without troubling to check the feeling, or to compare it with any that one has now. But living poets express a feeling that is actually being made and torn out of us at the moment. One does not recognize it in the first place; often for some reason one fears it; one watches it with keenness and compares it jealously and suspiciously with the old feeling that one knew. (22)

Jealousy, envy, longing or whatever else we might call the feeling has a pathetic appeal. Even though the nature that we experience in the present is not always the wild, untamed wilderness of the past that we value so highly, we want to believe that the nature of today is still valuable. Environmental writing such as Lord's casts the familiar nature of the present and the desired nature of the past together to create something new in an attempt to restore a sense of current worth.

Nancy Lord and John Burroughs (and Virginia Woolf) are not alone in their expression of envy of the world as it used to be. Edward Abbey expresses his envy of the non-human nature of the past in a discussion of Yosemite Valley in his book *The Journey Home: Some Words in Defense of the American West*. In chapter fourteen, "Return to

Yosemite: Tree Fuzz vs. Freaks,” he contrasts his first visit with his latest: “The first time I visited Yosemite National Park was in August 1944. The crowds were small, the waterfalls dry, and the hitchhiking tough. Since then, everything I’ve heard and read about Yosemite has made it seem less and less worth returning to” (138). Clearly, the Yosemite of the past had something enviable to visitors of the present Yosemite. Abbey provides the evidence of unpleasant change: “When we saw a sign, Water Ahead, I looked forward to a drink of pure Sierra Nevada spring water, fresh from the rocks. We found the spring, but another sign beside it said, Water Contaminated—Unfit to Drink” (139). And then some more: “Looking hard, I found my first Budweiser can below the bridge, down in the clear snow water. I clambered down the slippery granite in my dude boots, not to retrieve the can—*Let Nature Alone*—but for a drink of real mountain water. Spray paint on the boulders read, Joe & Juanita Was Here 7-4-70, and, Running Bear 1851” (139). The silver can in the stream, the paint on the rocks clearly marked with a date are more reasons why the environment in the past is something to be desired by nature lovers of the present. Abbey uses irony to emphasize his own philosophy—let nature alone—that if followed in the past would have left him a more pristine Yosemite, while at the same time acknowledging in his Running Bear comment that human influence extends beyond European American history.

The problem, as Abbey explains it, is that “On a typical summer weekend there may be anywhere from 20,000 to 30,000 people in and out of Yosemite Valley. It’s a small city much of the year” (143). Edward Abbey himself witnesses the destructive tendencies of some of the groups that want to use the park in whatever way they desire

without considering the way the other visitors want to use the park during their visit. Too many people fighting for too many uses of too little space creates problems. In the days before national parks were popular playgrounds, this was less of a problem. Smaller numbers of people shared and enjoyed more space than the numerous folks who currently share less, or at least, this is a popular current perspective, and, therefore, the past is enviable for its greener, cleaner landscapes, purer waters, and vast silence.

Abbey builds this information up to his conclusion of the chapter:

The Park Service believes that Yosemite Valley is not the proper location for youth festivals, organized or disorganized. No doubt true. . . . But I can think of other things that Yosemite Valley is not the proper place for. It is not the proper place for paved roads and motor traffic in any form. It is not the proper place for gas stations, supermarkets, bars, curio shops, barbershops, a hospital, a lodge, a hotel, a convention center, and a small city of permanent and transient residents. Above all Yosemite Valley is not a proper place for jail, for administrators, for police wearing park ranger uniforms. (144-45)

He then asks the important question: "What should Yosemite Valley be?" (145). His answer expresses the impossible-to-fulfill desire, the jealousy of the past, the envy: "It should be what it once was: the kind of place where a person would know himself lucky to make one pilgrimage there in his lifetime. A holy place" (145). He then punctuates the chapter with a short, single-sentence paragraph: "*Keep it like it was*" (145).

Edward Abbey feels some of the same frustration that Nancy Lord and John Burroughs feel, although he expresses his desires demanding, without recognizing the impossibility a land without human influence. Rather than seeking compromise and understanding, as does Lord, Abbey simplifies the problem, deifies nature, and envies the past almost without hope.

Gretel Ehrlich expresses her own nostalgic envy of the world of the past in a 2004 article about the loss of glaciers:

A glacier is time incarnate. When we lose a glacier—and we are losing most of them—we lose history, an eye into the past; we lose stories of how living beings evolved, how weather vacillated, why plants and animals died. The retreat and disappearance of glaciers—there are only 160,000 left—means we're burning libraries and damaging the planet, possibly beyond repair. Bit by bit, glacier by glacier, rib by rib, we're living the Fall. (29)

The horrific, Nazi image of burning books in this passage is especially compelling to sensitive readers. A holocaust of information is taking place in the loss of nature, and clearly, the world was better off before this happened (although the loss of glaciers has been taking place through nearly all of written history). The increase of human awareness creates an increase in envy of the world that was.

Later in the article, Ehrlich expresses the loss without the emotional metaphor: Twenty thousand years ago temperatures plummeted and ice grew from the top of the world like vines and ground covers. Glaciers

sprouted and surged, covering 10 million square miles—more than thirteen times what they cover now. As a result of their worldwide retreat and a global decrease in winter snow cover, the albedo effect—the ability of ice and snow to deflect heat back into space—is quickly diminishing. Snow and ice are the Earth’s built-in air conditioner—crucial to the health of the planet. Without winter’s white mantle, Earth will become a heat sponge. As heat escalates, all our sources of fresh water will disappear.

(30)

Even the strictly scientific description of the process cannot be viewed without nostalgia or envy of the past due to the placement of the previous comparison to the burning libraries, a holocaust which calls to mind the recent Holocaust of the twentieth century, an event that cannot be remembered without a desire for the world before such an event took place.

Envy of the past is not only a characteristic of non-fiction nature writers. A. Starker Leopold, a zoologist who conducted an ecological study of wildlife in Alaska in 1953, also expresses a somewhat envious nostalgia for the past in his scientific report. He explains that the first white explorers to Alaska were probably astounded by the drama of encountering large moving herds of caribou and therefore exaggerated their numbers (47), but then he says, “Be that as it may, there certainly were more caribou in central and southern Alaska originally than there are today, although we shall perhaps never know how many more. Today we are struggling to guard and restore mere scattered remnants of the southern herds” (48).

His word choice is telling. The words “were originally” have no historic reference point except for perhaps the time previous to European-descended explorers, a time still not entirely specific. Therefore, in this place, his scientific specificity is lost to envy of that which he cannot know, that which he cannot have: knowledge of how things used to be. The last sentence quoted above is more clearly nostalgic. The verb choice, “struggling to guard,” and the triple-layered description “mere scattered remnants” refer to the previous abundance which he had declared was certain, although with uncertain references.

Leopold’s envy of the past, although somewhat emotionally expressed, shows that envy, nostalgia, or perhaps even jealousy for the past is not only a romantic, idealized, or negatively pathetic appeal. Like Ehrlich, he shows that nature changed is knowledge lost. Envy of the way things used to be represents regret for what we cannot know and in Leopold’s book becomes reason to change our wildlife management methods.

Envy of the natural world of the past is useless unless the feelings are directed in some responsible way towards nature in the present. Nancy Lord recognizes this after her comparison to Burroughs and his longing for the past. Lord begins analyzing her feelings: “But I have to ask: what does this longing say about *me*? About my view, pessimistic or otherwise, of the present and future? What is it I *really* want, or lack” (91). Her questions are important if we are to view nature and the world with any sort of hope. She continues, “Am I just a hopeless romantic, as unable as Burroughs to recognize the truths of the real, present world? Or might my yearning lead me somewhere?” (91). Her questions show a responsibility towards nature that envy alone does not accomplish. She

finishes the paragraph definitively: "I don't want to return to an earlier time; I especially don't want to join the Harriman women in their corseted restrictions" (91). The chapter ends with a rejoicing in the green that Lord can see, in the nature that is.

Lord's enthusiasm for present environmental beauty is her compensation for her envy of past environmental beauty. She says,

I can scarcely take my eyes from the green. When I do, the color, like concentrate, is still with me, and every other color a part of it, a pigment in the mix. Before us the flat blue water breaks at our bow, like satin being sheared with a blade, and pairs of puffins with glaring yellow bills paddle to one side or the other, or dive from our path. (92)

The blue of the ocean and the yellow of the puffin are together as green as the hills, the trees, and grass. The issue of longing for the world gone by is not mentioned again as the chapter ends, so the answer to envy seems to be "Appreciate the present." Nevertheless, the blue of the water and the yellow of the puffins seem to represent a division of that which is green, a splitting of what is. And as the boat splits the water, Lord's observations split the meanings of green.

Chapter 3: *Green Alaska*: green naïveté

There has to be a better word than naïveté. This word processor's thesaurus lists as synonyms for naïve the words immature, inexperienced, adolescent, green, raw, youthful. The one I need is, of course, green, the definition of which is in flux throughout this essay. It is, however, a better word than the French naïve, which I must constantly right-click with the mouse in order for the appropriate diacritical marks to appear. Another appropriate synonym is the western slang "greenhorn," which has the appropriate definition as well. A green, naïve Alaska is an Alaska that does not know all that it can know yet. It is a tenderfoot, a beginner, a novice. All of these seem like appropriate terms, considering how quickly information is outdated, how quickly new scientific discoveries show us that what we thought that we knew ten minutes ago is incomplete. In a green, naïve Alaska, the narrator Nancy Lord can speak knowing that what she says will be viewed as raw and youthful to an audience one hundred years from now, just as what John Burroughs and the rest of the Harriman Alaska Expedition wrote and experienced one hundred years before was just a beginning.

In the introduction to her book, Lord emphasizes the greenness of the expedition: Who would not have *begged* to have been invited on such a trip, to witness Alaska at the century's cusp, when it and the world were still so new? When so much was possible? It was the age of innocence, still ruled by infectious Victorian optimism, and Alaska in 1899 was—as perhaps it still is—a place of promise. (xvi-xvii)

Her own voice as a narrator is also green. She is caught up in the moment, in the belief expressed by the Harriman Alaska Expedition, that because the world is unknown to *me* it is unknown, that because *my* map does not show the whole world, the world has parts that are new. The enthusiasm in this voice and the belief in innocence will later disappear at times as Lord discusses the trampling of native cultures and beliefs, the shooting and skinning of birds, and the general exploitation of the non-human world for human profit. But for now, her view is also naïve, raw, green.

The chapter that most clearly demonstrates the greenness of both her perspective and the perspective of the Harriman Alaska Expedition is the chapter "1899, a year." While some paragraphs within the chapter set up a context in which to understand the background of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, others doubly serve to stupefy readers with the possibilities of a world gone by: "One in 10,000 Americans owned a car. Of these, 40 percent were steam-powered, 38 percent were electric, and 22 percent were gasoline-powered. A Stanley Steamer was driven by F.E. Stanley to the top of New Hampshire's Mount Washington" (this is mentioned after the fact that in this year "Rockefeller consolidated his many oil-refining companies into Standard Oil of New Jersey" [20]); furthermore, in 1899, "Women's basketball was more popular than men's" (21). These examples seem to say, "If only they knew then what we know now." We may laugh at the steam-powered car and wonder at how long it has taken for women's basketball to regain status as a sport. "Oh, how little they knew back then of what the world would become," we might think. These differences in the past from the present also show modern people a world full of different possibilities. Too often we look at the

world as it is and think that this is the only way it can be. The 1899 world of alternate realities serves to show modern people how naïve we are. Electric cars have been a possibility for many years. Women have been popular and capable athletes before they were considered ill suited for professional sports.

1899, says Lord, “stood midway between the 1837 birth of John Burroughs and the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*,” the birth of the modern environmental movement (23). It is also the year that the first pollution laws were passed in the United States, “providing for fines up to \$2,500 for oil spills and similar acts of nonsewage pollution” (22). The placement of these facts, together with the statement that such laws were not enforced, reminds people that they are naïve if they think that simply passing laws about the environment is enough to bring about the change that is necessary to protect it. Tagged onto the end of the paragraph about pollution laws is the short sentence, “Wisconsin’s last wild passenger pigeon was shot,” emphasizing the lack of understanding people had at the time (22). Human understanding of ecology was raw, new, green.

The chapter “Mirage” plays an important role in changing the distance between knowledgeable and naïve. Lord explains that as her boat approaches the Alaska Peninsula, the land rises and rises above its natural height: “There’s nothing wishful, nothing hallucinatory about this mirage. It is visual truth, a turning of light through the atmosphere” (18). Her scientific explanation reasons away the naïve idea that the land might actually be rising. She continues, “The air higher over the water is warmer, and so less dense, than the air nearer the ocean, and the light passing through the layers doubles

one image on top of the other” (18). In these lines she demonstrates that the scientific mind knows that what it sees is not always what is real, what is solid. The Italian word for mirage, *fata morgana*, refers to the Fairy Morgan of Arthurian legend and demonstrates the naïveté of mythical explanations for natural phenomena while at the same time demonstrating that a knowledge of folklore and language decreases naïve use of words (19).

But Lord does not put all of her faith in empirical evidence: “We think we know something as definite and unchanging as a profile of land, and then we look again and find it twice as tall, as though the earth had opened and spilled out that much more fiery new magma” (19). She sees another piece of land called Sixty-foot Rock; the easily explained, testable, modern name of the landmark contrasts with its traditional name: “Before white people named it that, the Dena’ina Athabaskans of this place knew it by a name that translates to ‘Soles of Feet Waving.’ I used to study that solid mound of rock and wonder how it came to have so lovely and unlikely a name” (19). Lord then demonstrates the difference between seeing and measuring: “then one day I imagined early Dena’ina looking across the water from low in their boats and seeing the island raised above itself in mirage, as tall as the bottoms of a giant’s feet. And waving, waving in the bent, unsteady light” (19). The naïveté of the white settlers who came into a land that was already inhabited allowed them to impose their own view of the land onto what had already been known from another perspective. Green naïveté prevents people from seeing the world from any perspective but their own. Lord’s reconsideration of her own perspective, her discussion of the difference between mirage, reality, visual evidence, and

truth, and her final attempt to understand the land from a marginalized perspective help to create an uncertainty in human perception. Certainty is naïve.

This idea is emphasized in other ways. In the introduction of the book, Lord quotes Burroughs' personal journal in a moment before the expedition departs. He asks, "Have I made a mistake in joining this crowd for so long a trip? Can I see nature under such conditions?" (xvii). The question is important. It demonstrates a greenhorn's view of such a trip. Since nature is everywhere, how could Burroughs not see nature? In order to see nature, he must reconsider his definition of it. In order to see nature, he must reconsider the way he sees.

Indeed, Burroughs' point of view often serves Lord as a green contrast to present realities and perceptions. As Lord considers Alaskan oil drilling and the environmental costs of the coal, oil, and gas usage of her boat and of the Harriman Expedition's boat the *Elder*, she writes, "Burroughs would not have been concerned. He would write, another day, 'The fuel in the earth will be exhausted in a thousand or more years, and its mineral wealth, but man will find substitutes for these in the winds, the waves, the sun's heat, and so forth'" (28). This optimistic view seems naïve. Whether or not oil reserves will be gone in a thousand years or in ten years is insignificant considering that after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, environmental impact statements issued by the federal government that cite anywhere between a 27% and 72% chance of an oil spill occurring in Alaska still allow for more drilling along the coast (28). It is naïve to imagine that environmental impact statements alone are making a difference in protecting the environment. It is naïve to imagine that the government allows for oil drilling in Alaska strictly for the

benefit of the people. It is naïve to imagine that energy needs are the motivation in such a profitable venture as oil exploration and development.

Burroughs serves as naïve foil again in the chapter "The Birding Art." This time, however, it is a Burroughs of a more distant past, a younger, less appreciative Burroughs than the man on the Harriman Alaska Expedition. The Burroughs of the expedition criticized the professional ornithologist who shot birds and skinned them in order to keep track of them because "in his younger days, [he] had carried a gun on his walks and brought down any bird that warranted a closer look" (30). As Lord describes it, "This was the age, after all, of scientific acquisitiveness, when nothing was too much or too minor to end up at the Smithsonian or in any other museum or university. More was better" (29). The past tense stands out in this final sentence emphasizing the finiteness of this point of view, even though it is still held in regards to many aspects of current life. More is not better. It is naïve to think so.

Of the many different ways in which Lord could end this chapter, she in fact ends with an emphasis on the shortsightedness of certain points of view, in this case the killing of birds for the observation of birds. In her characteristic ironic single-sentence paragraph she says, "We know this: the last passenger pigeon Burroughs was ever to see was one he shot dead himself" (30). The sentence's structure is calculated to end with the reflexive pronoun. It places the emphasis on the guilty perpetrator. Although Burroughs' point of view concerning the killing of birds may have changed while he was on the Harriman Alaska Expedition, Lord makes him responsible for the words and actions of his youth. A naïve point of view is no excuse for irresponsibility.

Burroughs himself, at other moments in Lord's narrative, is shown to lament the naïveté of other members of the expedition. While other members of the expedition naively name glaciers (some of which already have names) after their exclusive East Coast universities, "Burroughs himself has no university affiliation, is without much formal schooling" (32). Yet while these other scholars speak to each other in Latin or academese, Burroughs recognizes their naïve perspective: "Oh, these specialists, who cannot see the flower for its petals and stamens, or the mountain for its stratification!" (32). Knowledge by itself is not the same as awareness, and Burroughs, who may not have as much knowledge as these other men, can show less naïveté when it comes to knowing the world around him.

At other times in Lord's narrative, Edward Harriman serves as a foil to bring out naïve perceptions of the world. This occurs clearly in "The Price of Otters." As discussed above, in this chapter Lord shows the interconnectedness of otters with the rest of the environment and how a dollar price on the otters' pelts affects the larger ecology and economy. In her study of the travel narratives of the Harriman Alaska Expedition, Lord notes,

Burroughs did not write a word about the otter pelt purchased for \$500 by Harriman at a stop in Yakutat Bay. Perhaps he didn't know? I think he did know, and was embarrassed, by the display of wealth and by what Harriman apparently didn't recognize or care about himself—his own culpability in the species' near extinction. (10-11)

As Lord likes to show, the issue is complex. The issue at hand is either green money or green naïveté. The naïveté comes when a person, in this case Harriman, does not recognize his own interconnectedness with nature. Just because Harriman does not kill an otter himself does not mean that he is not guilty of their potential extinction. Naïve participation in the market makes him guilty.

Harriman's naïveté is an issue again in "Wilderness." In this instance, the experienced Alaskan traveler John Muir plays a key role. He tells the greenhorn East Coast hunters of the expedition "that a valley he knew inland from Glacier Bay, through a pass just beyond Muir Glacier, would be just the place to look for big game. . . . In 'Howling Valley' they would hear the echoing cries of hundreds of wolves and find all manner of animals, large and small" (136). Harriman and the other hunters, having never been to the area, took his word. Because Muir is not green, he plays with the greenness of these other men. Lord explains, "Muir neglected to mention that in his own, earlier travels to the valley, he'd nearly met disaster" (137). Here two definitions of green are lost in the wildness of the valley: "There was no romance to be found in the obscurity of white, in the cold" (137). The physical color green is lost to the power of winter, and green naïveté is lost in the experience of "smallness" and "insignificance" (137).

Lord demonstrates another type of naïve perspective in her exploration of the Smithsonian's collection of animal bones. She describes her encounter with the skeleton of the Steller's sea cow: "Always, I have known of the Steller's sea cow, known that Vitus Bering's onboard naturalist, on the return leg of the first Russian voyage to Alaska, had barely described it before it was gone for all time" (161). "Always" and "known"

both have conspicuous places in this sentence; they make their mark of certainty. Lord continues, using possessive language to show her relationship to this knowledge: "I have held the animal like a myth in my imagination, believing in it as one believes the inhabitants of a bestiary, wanting it to have its place and its meaning. I have carried a mental picture of it...through my life" (161). And then she reveals the startling truth in a short, contrastive sentence/paragraph: "But I had no idea!"

Her own naïveté on the subject of the Steller's sea cow is juxtaposed against the ancients Greeks' naïveté, those who called this branch of the mammal family sirens because "[They] apparently mistook an upright, nursing dugong for a mermaid" (161). Lord explains that, now, the sea cow is extinct: "No Steller's sea cow was ever collected for science, and the careful drawings made by Steller's assistant disappeared on their way across Siberia" (162). This lack of physical evidence creates a lack in the ability to clearly perceive, a permanent ignorance on the subject, a permanent lack of awareness. Lord uses Burroughs for an example: "there is Burroughs, on the edge of my consciousness, trying still to bring his vision up to Alaska's scale. I don't know whether he knew of the extinct Steller's sea cow" (163). She then imagines his response if he ever were to see one. Lack of knowledge does not always mean lack of awareness. In this situation, Lord overcomes green naïveté with imagination.

At other times, it is the naïve view of other experts of the past that bring out the green in Alaska: "The fate of Alaska's forests is one the Harriman Alaska Expedition miscalculated altogether. The forestry expert aboard judged Alaska's trees inferior and difficult to harvest, as well as too far from markets, and promised they would be left

untouched except for local use" (4-5). The modern reality: "These many years later, the lush rainforests of southeast Alaska have been taken down, and now the industry is rapidly shaving our slowest-growth boreal woods of their ancient, spindly spruce" (5). Lord still calls her home Edenic (5). But no matter how beautiful Eden may be in people's imaginations, it is still paradise lost, and it is still the home of a man and a woman who for a while lived with eyes that were not open (*Genesis* 3:5-7).

The difference in perspective between Lord and the experts of the past, created in part by time, is important to the green point of view she presents. Lord says, "What they recorded—and maybe especially what they failed to note—tells me something about their time, and mine. My pursuit of history has brought me back to myself, yearning in a crowd for my own idealized past, a picture-perfect country as big as all imagining" (165). Lord is not simply accusatory as she recognizes the naïveté of the people of the past; she is reflective. She recognizes her own naïve yearnings for an idealized past, but she is not self-deprecating. Both the green naïveté of the past and the green naïveté of the present show not only how big Alaska is, but they also show how big the world is, how much it can contain, how many different perspectives it can house, how much its inhabitants can improve.

Conclusion: *Green Alaska*

In the chapter “Artistic License,” Nancy Lord gives away an important clue to the indeterminate definition of green that receives free play throughout the book. She describes the volcano Iliamna through the perspective of three different artists. First, John Burroughs: “an impressive spectacle...wrapped in a mantle of snow, but...warm at heart” (24). Second, John Muir: “glorious Iliamna smoking and steaming distinctly at times” (24). Third, the visual artist Frederick Dellenbaugh: “[he] painted the mountain with a thin line of gray drifting from its summit and with snow all the way to tideline, which surely couldn’t have been accurate for the end of June, when all lowland and foothills are not only bare of snow but green” (24). The differences are easily explained: “Perhaps, though, it looked lovelier painted that way—all that stark white between sea and sky” (24). And, of course, through the chapter’s title she gives herself and these different artists the license they need to create the picture they want. This chapter is generously balanced with a factual discussion of volcanoes and spruce forests, but perception and reception of fact are both within “Artistic License.”

Consistent with the multiplicity of meanings for the word “green,” once expressed, perception and perspective are not set in stone. They can also change with time and experience. Lord demonstrates this in “The Two Johnnies.” She says of John Muir and John Burroughs, “The first time they met, six years earlier, they already knew one another by reputation” (15). After meeting each other, they wrote their impressions. Muir says of Burroughs, “He had made a speech, eaten a big dinner, and had a headache. So he seemed tired, and gave no sign of his fine qualities” (15). Burroughs says of Muir,

“an interesting man with the Western look upon him. Not quite enough penetration in his eyes” (15). These points of view and their knowledge of each other by reputation did not limit these men in later perceptions of each other. Burroughs later says, “A very interesting man; a little prolix at times. You must not be in a hurry, or have any pressing duty, when you start his stream of talk and adventure...He is a poet and almost a seer. Something ancient and far-away in the look of his eyes” (15). Although Lord’s chapter is clearly not set up only to contrast these men’s different perceptions of each other through time, Burroughs’ own words show that one look at a person is not enough to know him, and an initial perception does not control all future perceptions. The way a person sees changes over time. Limiting meaning to an initial perception prevents a real understanding. Thus the descriptions of Alaska in Burroughs’ *In Green Alaska* in 1899 influence but do not control the perception of Alaska in Nancy Lord’s *Green Alaska* in 1999, and the descriptions of Alaska in 1999 do not override all that was said before.

Recognizing differences in perception across time, across emotional states, across cultures, and across different value systems is what Nancy Lord does in *Green Alaska*. Lord asks, “what can we know to be truly fixed in this world?” She responds to her own inquiry, not with an answer, but with an observation: “Perception, like beauty, lies in the beholder’s eye, and may, it seems, have more to do with expectations than with anything resembling a clear and scientific truth” (139). William Blake observes something similar when he says in “Nature As Imagination,” “to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself. *As a man is, so he sees*” (16, emphasis added). Similarly, Thoreau says, “The question is not what you look at but what you see” (qtd. in Brooks

xiv). Although these observations call into question whether humans can see and present information objectively, the awareness that these observations bring will help people overcome the weaknesses in their ability to perceive and allow for a multidimensional point of view.

Susan Kollin argues in her book *Nature's State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier* that since Alaska became a state, there has been a perpetual struggle to change outside perceptions of the environment. It has been "known alternatively as 'Seward's Folly,' 'Walrussia,' or 'Iceburgia'" (29). Alaska has also been perceived as the "refrigerator of the world," a warehouse of resources, the last great wilderness, and the last frontier, each nickname and perception bringing with it different implications and problems (55). Kollin also argues that "landscapes are not naturally given but rather are socially constituted entities where meanings shift as the result of specific social practices" (19). How different people perceive Alaska says more about each person or the community and culture that they come from than it says about Alaska as a place.

In *Green Alaska*, Nancy Lord demonstrates that this is true. The environment can be a repository of lucrative otter pelts, useful whales, valuable fish, oil, and gold, or it can be a refuge from city life where a person can experience his own smallness and insignificance or other emotions. The environment can be a repository of information. The environment can be a place to visit, or it can be a place to live. The latter is important. William Cronon argues that when we see wilderness as home, we will do our best to take care of it (108). In the end, Lord is writing about her home.

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